

# Improving the learning experience and learning environment of adults in Higher Education – Project LIHE: the Portuguese Case<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The promotion of a knowledge-based society needs, on one hand, technological infrastructure and, on the other hand, a workforce with the necessary skills, knowledge and competences, supported by a well-structured initial education and by a continuous learning program. In the last years, Universities have opened their doors to all citizens, regardless of their status or origin, if they have the capacity to benefit from the educational services on offer. This strategy has allowed mature students to enter (or re-enter) the formal higher education system. Although these students may possess a richness of experience, they can also have difficulty in adapting to the pedagogical approaches of learning and teaching and their attitudes and problems are not necessarily the same as those of traditional students. It is in this context that the project LIHE – Learning in Higher Education emerges. In this paper, the background of the project and the most relevant literature for the subject are briefly described. It is followed by a presentation of the project aims, objectives and methodological approaches. The Portuguese case is introduced, together with the results of questionnaires and interviews. Some preliminary conclusions are outlined. Finally, avenues of future research are discussed

## 1. Introduction

The transition of an information-based society to a knowledge-based society brought new concerns to the EU agenda and to the governments of the different countries in Europe. The promotion and the development of the knowledge-based society needs technological infrastructures and also people with the necessary skills and competences. Such a work force must be supported by well-structured initial education and also by a continuous learning program. This education should be available to all citizens, not only the traditional young students but also to those whose circumstances prevented them from progressing through the formal educational process.

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For some considerable time, universities were the domain of the elite. Only the privileged few had the opportunity to go on to university. In recent years, this situation has changed dramatically. Universities have now opened their doors to benefit from a wider intake. This expansion has allowed new groups of students, traditionally excluded or under-represented in HE, to participate in higher education (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002); these include adult non-traditional students. However, adult students are still expected to fit into educational institutions designed for younger students.

Adult students should not be considered as a problematic category, needing special treatment due to their different circumstances, styles and needs in terms of learning procedures but as a group with vitality and extra experience; they should be considered as contributing new strengths to their chosen institutions.

The studies concerning the expectations of these students, their main motivations to enrol for the first time or to return to higher education and the barriers found in this process, provide new information for policy making. The project *LIHE – Learning in Higher Education* [100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GI] aims to improve the learning experience and environment of adults, particularly non-traditional adults, in Higher Education. It aims to promote lifelong learning in HE within a European dimension, by raising awareness among practitioners and policy makers (institutional and governmental) of the learning needs of adults in HE.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section will present the background of the project followed by an overview of the most relevant literature for the subject. The project, its aims, objectives and methodological approaches are then introduced, as well as the Portuguese case as far as the results of questionnaires and interviews are concerned; some preliminary conclusions are outlined and avenues for future research are discussed.

## **2. Background to the project**

This research grew out of an EU Targeted Social and Economic Research (TSER) project (SOE2-CT97-2021) entitled *University Adult Access Policies and Practices Across the European Union and their Consequences for the Participation of Non-Traditional Adults* involving six European countries (Belgium, UK, Germany, Spain, Sweden and Ireland). This was preceded by a pilot project between the University of Louvain, Belgium and the University of Warwick, UK. The TSER project looked at the access of non-traditional adult students in European universities, both in terms of getting into the system and their experiences while undertaking a degree programme. Interview and questionnaire data revealed a wide range of issues. Within this project, looking at the attitudes and experiences of learning and teaching in higher education (both adult students and lecturers) formed only one of many aspects of the research. However, it highlighted that this is an under-researched area, despite the fact that it is an important one, particularly as widening participation strategies have increased the number of adult students in higher education across Europe in recent years. The study revealed that institutional policies and practices are critical in facilitating, or not, the access of adults in HE and that the impact and nature of the provision varies across Europe (Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot & Merrill, 1999). Despite the expansion in adult undergraduate students, universities continue to cater overwhelmingly for younger students. Many European countries now have a mass higher education system as defined by Trow (1989) yet, as Parry (1997) points out, higher education institutions have retained their elite characteristics. Adults have to

adjust and slot into this structure. The TSER project identified the need for institutional change, particularly in relation to the curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, to enhance the access and learning experiences of adults in HE.

Lifelong learning, social inclusion and widening participation are now high on the agendas of the EU and national governments across Europe. Interest in lifelong learning policies stemmed from economic and social changes, not only within Europe but globally, brought about by the transition to a knowledge society in late modernity. The knowledge society, as Castells (1996) points out has introduced a new form of inequality based on the acquisition – or not - of knowledge: the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The significance of lifelong learning for the European Commission was evident in the 1994 White Paper:

Preparation for life in tomorrow's world cannot be satisfied by a once-and-for-all acquisition of knowledge and knowhow... All measures must therefore necessarily be based on the concept of developing, generalising and systematising lifelong learning and continuing training (CEC, 1994: 12, 136).

The EU's commitment to lifelong learning was more recently highlighted in its *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000) and *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (2001) which asserted that:

The principles which underpin lifelong learning and guide its effective implementation emphasise the centrality of the learner, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities (2001: 3,4).

This current Socrates Grundtvig project *LIHE – Learning in Higher Education* [100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GI] is, therefore, being undertaken against a policy background which promotes lifelong learning. Building upon the issues highlighted by the TSER project, this project explores in more depth the learning and teaching approaches experienced by non-traditional adults in higher education. For example, adult participants in the TSER project indicated that they were not very satisfied with some aspects of teaching practices. Many were disappointed with the lack of feedback and support from lecturers regarding their written work. As adult learners may not be as confident in their learning techniques as younger students, guidance and support is vital. Questionnaire data revealed that lectures are the most common teaching method employed in universities, yet the adult respondents preferred a mixture of methods such as lectures, discussion groups and seminars. Many would like to have a variety of assessment methods but exams remain the dominant method. If national and EU lifelong learning policies are to become a reality, institutions need to change their structures to encourage more diverse and under-represented groups, such as working class women and men, minority ethnic groups, to enter degree programmes.

### **3. An Overview of Literature**

A literature review was undertaken as part of this Grundtvig project. It quickly became apparent that there is very little literature within the seven participating countries that addresses directly the issues of adults and learning and teaching

practices in higher education. There is an abundance of literature focusing on adult learning theories and the andragogy debate developed by Knowles and its recent criticism (Rogers, 2003). Within the French speaking academic world theories on adult learning and identities have been developed by the work of Bourgeois and Nizet (1997). Adult learning theories are also presented by radical adult educators, such as the work of Freire, which argue for a critical pedagogy.

A growing body of literature is developing, some of it comparative within a European context, which looks at higher education, access, institutional culture and the participation of adult students. Some of this literature is policy focused or it explores the theory/practice interface rather than being directly practice-oriented. A gap therefore exists in this field. Increasingly literature on higher education is drawing on biographical methods for exploring and understanding adults' attitudes and experiences ,regarding learning (Antikainen *et al* (1996), West, 1996, Merrill, 1999).

Comparative European studies on non-traditional adult students in European higher education have been undertaken but do not include specific research on learning and teaching. Schuetze's and Slowey's (2002) work of ten countries, including a few outside Europe, is a useful study for identifying who the non-traditional adult students are and institutional factors which affect non-participation. It also discusses the processes for adapting higher education institutions to meet the needs of lifelong learners. As cited earlier, the final report for the TSER project on the access of non-traditional adult students contains a small section on learning and teaching approaches. An earlier two country study (UK and Belgium) by Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot and Merrill (1999) entitled 'The Adult University' looks at institutional policies and practices and includes a chapter on the voices of adult students and their experiences of university. An article, stemming from the last study, (Merrill, 2001) explores, through biographical methods, adult learners' attitudes towards teaching methods, assessment and learning with younger students. With a growing adult student population in European universities it is important that aspects relating to learning and teaching are explored and researched. The work of this project will make an important contribution to this under-researched field.

#### **4. Project aims, objectives and methodological approaches**

The project *LIHE* is being developed under the program SOCRATES, and the GRUNDTVIG action. Its overall aims and objectives are to improve the learning experience and environment of adults, particularly non-traditional adults, in higher education.

Specifically, the aims of the project are: (1) promote lifelong learning in HE within a European dimension, (2) raise awareness amongst practitioners and policy makers (institutional and governmental) of the learning needs of adults in HE, (3) identify the learning experiences and needs of adult students, (4) promote lifelong learning in HE by developing a pedagogy and curriculum which will appeal to those who feel that HE is not for them, (5) share good practice at regional and national levels and between countries, especially between institutions and countries which have relatively high numbers of adults students and those who do not, (6) promote institutional change, (7) increase knowledge in the field on the learning needs and approaches of non-traditional adults in HE, (8) identify policy recommendations for EU, national and institutional levels.

As for the objectives, these are: (1) develop, exchange and disseminate innovative approaches and practices to learning and teaching, (2) develop strategies for adapting HE systems to the needs of adult learners, whether for institutions with few adult students or those with a relatively high number, (3) development of a handbook, containing guidelines, learning and teaching approaches and strategies, (4) disseminate outcomes through national workshops, a European conference and publications for policy makers and practitioners, (5) produce leaflets on policy recommendations at EU, national and institutional levels, and (6) establish a website to include the handbook and to promote exchange of information and discussion.

The target group is *non-traditional adult students*. By *non-traditional adult students*, also referred to as *mature students* or *adult students*, is meant,

*adults over the age of 25 who left school with few or no qualifications, have been out of the education system for a long time, have no previous HE experience and come from a disadvantaged group (one or more facts may apply). This will, therefore, include adults who are working class, women, disabled, minority ethnic groups and adults across the age span.*

This project is being carried out as a European cooperation project among seven institutions in the following countries: Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom and Sweden.

The empirical methodological design of the project includes 3 phases. In phase 1, mature students are asked to answer a questionnaire, developed by the consortium and translated and adapted to the reality of each country, which aim is to elicit the difficulties felt by students when they entered / re-entered HE, the pedagogical approaches and type of assessment used and preferred. In phase 2, 20 students, from each country, were selected and in-depth biographical interviews were carried out in order to obtain as full a picture as possible of an individual's learning experience. Finally, in phase 3, lecturers will answer a questionnaire and will be interviewed so that models of good practice for learning and teaching in HE, are identified.

In the following section, the work done so far within the Portuguese case, for phase 1 and 2, is introduced, also introduced is a brief characterization of the most relevant aspects of the HE issues relevant for mature students accessing learning and teaching in Higher Education in Portugal. Results are presented and discussed.

## **5. The Portuguese case**

### **5.1 National context for adults in Higher Education**

The term HE, in Portugal, embraces both Universities and Polytechnics. This dual system emerged in 1973, when "higher education of short duration" to address training in new technological areas was first envisaged (Lei n° 5/73, 11<sup>th</sup> August). Some of the Polytechnics were created by Decree Law n° 402/73 of 11<sup>th</sup> August. However, the formal creation of Polytechnics only took place from 1977 onwards, with the introduction of Decree Law n° 427-B/77, 14<sup>th</sup> October, when polytechnic education was expanded to include the training of qualified professionals in technological areas and for the education sector.

In Portugal, adult students, normally, access HE either by having completed secondary education or by passing the *Exame Extraordinario da Capacidade de*

*Acesso ao Ensino Superior* (Portaria nº 106/2002, 1st February). According to the *Gabinete de Acesso ao Ensino Superior*, the unit within the Ministry of Science and Higher Education which coordinates nationally access to HE in the country, the number of students accessing HE via this special examination is very small within the universe of HE population<sup>2</sup>.

There is another route to access Higher Education, only recently implemented (Decree Law nº 393-B/99 of 2<sup>nd</sup> October and subsequent legislation) which is via post secondary education – *Escolas Tecnológicas*. The courses offered at these *Escolas Tecnológicas* are at level IV – technical training, post secondary<sup>3</sup>.

## **5.2. The programme of studies attended by adult students interviewed and answering the questionnaire**

Within the limitations of the resources available for the project, and its exploratory nature, it was decided that the approach to identify Adult students would have to be simplified, without sacrificing the reliability or accuracy of the data being collected. In these circumstances, it was decided that, in Portugal, the study would focus on two institutions with programmes of study where the majority of attendees are adult students. These are (Case study 1) the *Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação*, of *Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão da Informação* (ISEGI) – *Universidade Nova de Lisboa* (UNL) and (Case study 2) the *Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado* and *Licenciatura em Marketing* of *Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto* (ISCAP), of *Instituto Politécnico do Porto* (IPP) (Oporto Polytechnic Institut). This will ensure a sample of adult students attending University or Polytechnic. Each programme of study is briefly characterised in the following paragraph.

### **5.2.1. ISEGI**

The *Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação* (2 years) of *ISEGI* – created in 1990 [Portaria nº 1137/90, 16th November], aims to prepare qualified professionals for higher positions in the areas of Statistics and Information Management, “to perform the new functions that the Information Society requires in the national statistics systems, as well as in the private, public and European Union institutions” (<http://www.isegi.unl.pt/ensino/presencial/lic355/default.asp>). The Course lasts 4 semesters and is organised in units of credits corresponding to lectures and contact hours. It is delivered after working hours. Candidates should have at least a *Bacharelato* degree or two completed years of Higher Education.

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<sup>2</sup> According to data available from the *Gabinete de Acesso ao Ensino Superior*, Ministry of Education 2003, in the year 2002 only 578 mature students have been approved, through the *Exame Extraordinário de Acesso ao Ensino Superior*, to enrol on a HE course.

<sup>3</sup> It is envisaged that these *Escolas Tecnológicas* courses will be undertaken under the auspices of an agreement with at least one higher Education Institution (Portaria nº 392/2002, 12th April, Portaria nº 989/99 3rd November; Preamble, art. 3). Successful completion of *Escolas Tecnológicas* diplomas confers “Diploma de Especialização Tecnológica”. Graduates with a *Diploma de Especialização Tecnológica - DET*, conferred by the attendance of a *Curso de Especialização Tecnológica* and with 18 months of professional activity in the area of the diploma, can become candidates to Higher Education (Decree Law nº 393-B/99 of 2<sup>nd</sup> October, art. 3 para. b. altered by Portaria nº 392/2002, 12<sup>th</sup> April, art. 1<sup>st</sup> para 3.). There would be a *quota* of places in public HE institutions for these candidates.

### 5.1.2. ISCAP

The *Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado* has been lectured in ISCAP since 1975/76. It consists of two cycles, the first one lasting 3 years (with classes during the day) or 4 years (with classes after working hours). Successful students are awarded the diploma of *Bacharelato*. The second cycle, which is available only after working hours, awards the *Licenciatura*. Students with this *Bacharelato* can work in an office as an executive manager or as a technical staff supporting the Management function. Those with the *Licenciatura* can perform Management functions.

The *Licenciatura em Marketing* was created in the year 1996/97 and awards the diplomas of *Bacharelato* (1<sup>st</sup> cycle, 3 years of studies) and *Licenciatura* (2<sup>nd</sup> cycle, plus 2 years of studies). It aims to prepare students in the marketing area as well as in the domains of Accounting, Law, Management, Economy and Quantitative Methods.

### 5.3. Questionnaires findings

As referred to above, in order to elicit the learning experiences, needs and difficulties of mature students in HE, a questionnaire, centrally developed by the LIHE team, then translated and adapted to the Portuguese reality, was administered between January and March 2003 to students enrolled in both programmes of study referred to in 5.2, via email or in person, during lectures. The sample was drawn from those students who satisfied the “non traditional adult/mature students” definition introduced above. Following this validation procedure, the sample consisted of thirty six (36) students from ISEGI and 19 from ISCAP. These are not considered to be a representative sample of mature students in these Institutions; however they were acceptable for the preliminary intended survey of mature learning needs. They only represent the opinions of the 55 total students that replied to our initial request; other students may be enrolled in the course. However, on the dates that questionnaire was administered, some students missed classes or did not respond to the emails requesting completion of the questionnaire.

#### A) Personal Information

Of the 36 respondents at **ISEGI**, the majority of students work and study at the same time, are young (between 25 and 34 years of age), are Portuguese (72,2%, although 22,2% are coming from the PALOP<sup>4</sup>), work as technicians (técnicos), professionals (profissões liberais) or managers (quadros superiores) and live with husband / wife or alone. Their distribution by gender is balanced: 50% (18) are male and 50% (18) are female.

Regarding the 19 responses of **ISCAP** students, the majority of these students also work and study at the same time, are young (between 25 and 34 years of age), are Portuguese (100%), work as administrators (técnicos administrativos) or technicians (técnicos) and live with their parents or with husband / wife. 63,2% of the respondents are female and 36,8% are male.

We can already observe here a slight difference between students of ISEGI and those of ISCAP, as far as their job / profession is concerned. Those from ISEGI have higher positions in firms than those from ISCAP. We do not have enough data to say that this is relevant but there is an ongoing discussion concerning the

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<sup>4</sup> PALOP – Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa – African Countries with Portuguese as Official Language.

kind of education / training that Polytechnics administer. The social image of Polytechnics is not as good as that of Universities and so employers might prefer those with a *Licenciatura* from Universities. This could explain the fact that some of the mature students interviewed at ISEGI, said that they have interrupted their education after a *Bacharelato* (see section B); they then decided to enrol for a *Licenciatura* at a University (e.g. ISEGI), even though they could have obtained the same Diploma at a Polytechnic.

## **B) Previous educational experience**

In **ISEGI**, the majority had followed the normal progression of studies in Portugal's education system, i.e., via completion of secondary level studies, before reaching HE. 80,6% (29) reported having attended public schools and 16,7% (6) attended private schools. When asked if they have interrupted their studies, 52,8% (19) of the respondents said "No" and 41,7% (15) said "Yes". Of those, the majority of respondents reported having interrupted their studies at the age of 23.

The period of interruption of their studies, for the majority of these students, occurred when they attained a *Bacharelato* or Diploma at secondary level (12<sup>th</sup> year-general).

As for **ISCAP**, the type of education attended before enrolling in this course, for the majority, also followed the normal progression of studies in Portugal before reaching HE. The majority (94,7%; 18) studied in the public school system. 47,4% (9) report they interrupted their studies, while the same number had not. Of those that reported an interrupted education, the majority said that this happened at the age of 18 or 19. As for the qualifications they had at the time of the interruption, of the 9 respondents answering "Yes" to this question, results are equally distributed between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> years of secondary education and *Bacharelato*.

## **C) Employment**

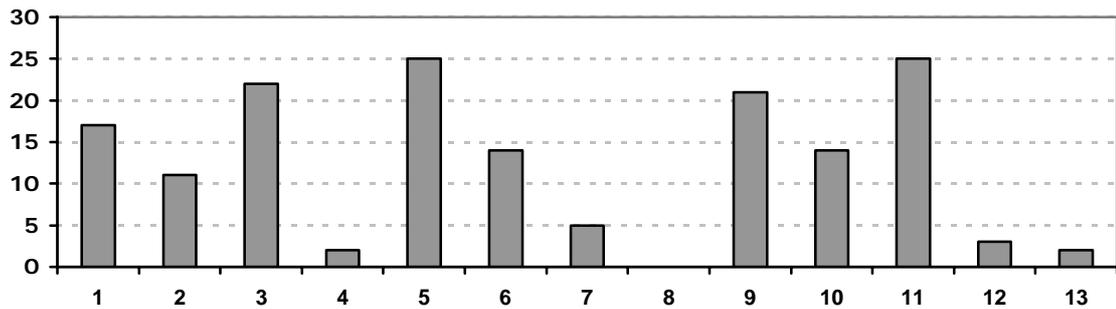
As for **ISEGI**, out of all (36) respondents, there are only 7 students (8,3%) who claim they had a full-time job before re-starting their formal programme of studies. 3 had a full time job, 1 had a part time job, 2 were unemployed and the other did voluntary work. Concerning the 24 that re-started their studies in a part time situation (working and studying at the same time), 18 had a full time job, 5 had a part time job and one was unemployed.

In the **ISCAP** case, only 4 students reported having re-started their studies full-time. Of these, 3 had a full time job before enrolling on the course, i.e., they have ceased their employment to dedicate their time to studies. The other student reported having an "other" situation, which was not revealed in the questionnaire.

## E) Higher Education Studies

In **ISEGI**, when we asked students to choose from the several factors presented, which may have influenced their decision to return to study in HE, responses varied as illustrated in figure 1.

**Figure 1 - Factors influencing the decision to return to a programme of studies in HE (ISEGI)**



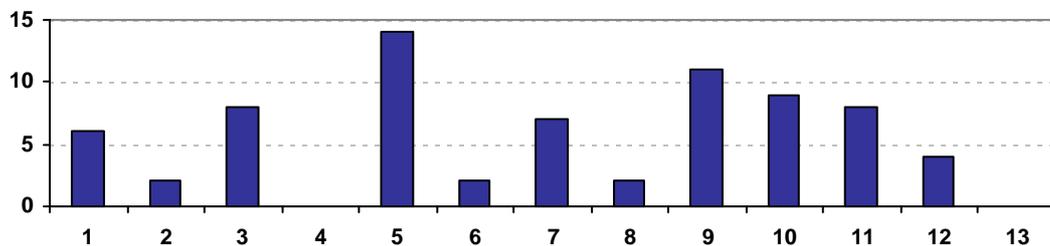
Legend:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. To change direction in life                   | 7. To do something for yourself                  |
| 2. To change employment                          | 8. Children started growing up / starting school |
| 3. For career enhancement                        | 9. For self-development                          |
| 4. To be able to re-enter employment             | 10. Interest in learning for learning's sake     |
| 5. To gain more qualifications                   | 11. To become better informed as a person        |
| 6. To take up the opportunity of a second chance | 12. To meet new people / social reasons          |
|  | 13. To help children with their studies          |

The most important reasons to return to school and, in particular, to HE, are: (1<sup>st</sup>) career enhancement, (2<sup>nd</sup>) to gain more qualifications, (3<sup>rd</sup>) to become better informed as a person and (4<sup>th</sup>) self development.

As for **ISCAP**, results are shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2 - Factors influencing the decision to return to a programme of studies in HE (ISCAP)**



(See legend in figure 5)

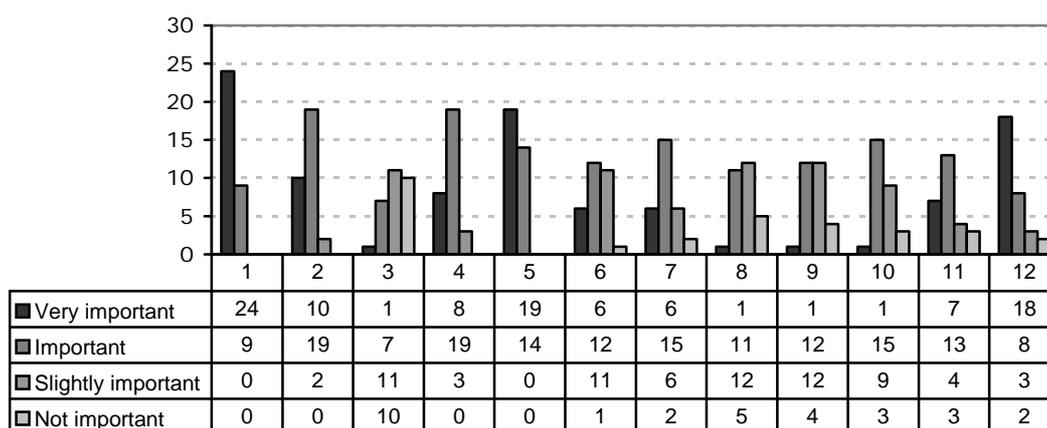
In this case, the most important reasons that lead these students to return to HE, are: (1<sup>st</sup>) to gain more qualifications, (2<sup>nd</sup>) self development, (3<sup>rd</sup>) interest in

learning for learning's sake, (4<sup>th</sup>) to become better informed as a person and (5<sup>th</sup>) career enhancement.

Although in general the factors influencing the decision to return to HE are the same for students from ISEGI and ISCAP, they do not appear in the same order. For instance, in ISEGI, the most important reason is career enhancement while in ISCAP, it is to gain more qualifications. One could argue that these are almost the same. Yet, and taking into consideration the answers to other questions (e.g. professions / job and qualification when they interrupted the studies), we are inclined to think that those students from ISEGI might be more ambitious in terms of career, i.e., they are not studying just to obtain a *Licenciatura* but to improve their position in the labour market. Those from ISCAP, as they do not have a Diploma yet, see their first goal as obtaining a qualification. This conclusion is also supported by the item "changing employment" – at ISEGI this item has been chosen 10 students, while at ISCAP, only 2 students have chosen it.

The respondents were also asked to rank twelve factors according to their importance (very important, important, less important and of no importance), as barriers in accessing HE. Results for ISEGI are shown in figure 3.

**Figure 3 - Barriers in accessing HE**



Legend:

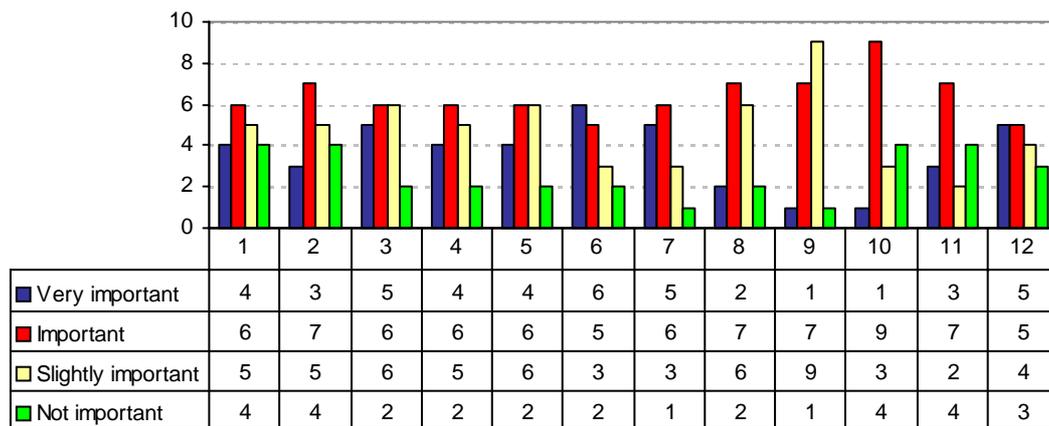
1. Time
2. Family commitments
3. Friendship commitments
4. Finance
5. Employment commitments
6. Self confidence

7. Lack of information about courses / institutions
8. Transport difficulties
9. Distance to travel
10. Lack of support from family / friends
11. Lack / cost of childcare
12. Time of classes

The greatest difficulties faced when enrolling in a HE Programme of study concerns the "lack of time" (100% consider it as very important or important), "employment commitments" (57,6% consider it as very important while 42,2% refer to it as important), the "family commitments" (93,5% consider it very important or important), the "time of classes" (58,1% consider it as very important and 25,8% see it as important) and "finance" (90% see it as important or very important). Probably among these, payment of fees, books, displacements and being away from the family home can be included. The least important factor is "friendship commitments".

As for **ISCAP**, results are as follows (see figure 4).

**Figure 4 - Barriers in accessing HE**



(see legend in figure 3)

The most difficult barriers in accessing HE are related with “self-confidence” (or lack of it) (37,5% referring it as very important and 31,2% as important), and “lack of information” (33,3% as very important and 40% as important). After that, the issues are concerned with “time of classes”, “friendship” and “employment commitments”, “time” and “finance factors”. The least important barriers are “distance to travel” (55% answered “slightly important” or “not important”).

It is curious to note that the self-confidence (or the lack of it) is much more important for ISCAP respondents, than it is for ISEGI ones. Could it be possible that this answer is also related with the social image of Polytechnic? Or do students think that courses might be easier at Polytechnics and as they do not have self confidence, they prefer to go their instead of Universities? Or might there be other underlying reasons for these choices?

As for teaching approaches, the majority (27,7%) of **ISEGI** students prefer the lectures (aula expositiva) or a combination between lectures and project work (55,6% total). They also think that those approaches are the most useful for mature students. They justify their answers saying that “lectures approach minimizes the time losses”, “there is no unnecessary deviation and they go directly to the core issues”; “it allows contact between the tutor and the student”; “it facilitates information gathering”; “it encourages the development of reflective and critical thinking and learning the basics”. The project work “makes possible the sharing of ideas and knowledge creation”; “it is organized and oriented towards the students”; “it helps the practical application of the knowledge acquired and allows self work and information gathering”. Curiously, the approach mentioned as least useful is also the lecture (by 27,7% of students) and the reasons presented for this answer are: “this approach does not arouse students interest”, “it does not give the students an opportunity to show their perception of the content of the discipline”; “it reduces the stimulus of the constructive criticism regarding the subject”; “it is boring and less dynamic and less effective”.

The **ISCAP** students consider discussion groups as the teaching approach most useful with mature students (31,5%). Then, they choose the “lecture” (21%) and the project work (21%). The reasons for choosing the lecture are: “it allows a wider range of topics to be addressed”; “it facilitates learning, idea sharing and knowledge creation” and “it helps to develop the capacity for intervention and debate”. The reasons for “discussion groups” are: “this approach allows more interactivity and opinion diversity, besides encouraging closer involvement”.

Finally, "project work" is useful because respondents feel that students learn more and it encourages closer involvement. The least useful approaches are seminars because this does not allow a close relationship between the student and the teacher.

The type of "assessment" mostly used at **ISEGI** (50%) is a mixture of assessed assignments and examinations. This is also the most preferred one (36,1%). Students also mention that they like "project" (8%), "open book examinations" (8%) and "examinations only" (8%).

At **ISCAP**, the type of assessment used is "examinations only" (21%) and "a mixture of assessed assignments and examinations" (21%). The most preferred ones are those mentioned as used.

#### **5.4. Results of students' interviews**

In order to obtain a full picture of an individual's learning experience and needs, the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the research involves in depth interviews of mature students. The interview approach was biographical to obtain data that informs the type of learning and teaching and institutional strategies that are needed for such students. The topics and questions aimed at eliciting data about the reasons why they decided to return to learn at a certain moment in their lives, as well as their teaching and learning experiences and difficulties felt in all this process. We interviewed 15 students (12 from ISEGI and 3 from ISCAP) and asked them to look at their working lives, family and initial schooling. In short, we asked them to tell the story of their lives (biographical interviews) (Polkinghorne, 1995), as one way to understand adult learners experiences of past and anticipated life.

On average, the interview lasted for 50 minutes. The student was asked to tell his story concerning school courses and the interviewer just intervened to direct the interviewee towards one topic or another (e.g., asking him/her about pedagogical approaches or assessment methods). The interviews were conducted as a conversation. All the interviews were taped and transcribed, after which a content analysis using the application NUDIST was conducted. Analysis of interviews results, addressing the themes of "expectations regarding attendance in HE", "learning and teaching approaches" and "difficulties felt during attendance of HE classes" are presented in the following sections.

##### **5.4.1 Expectations regarding attendance in HE**

We can divide the expectations of students into two groups: one concerning those reporting that they had always dreamt of having a *Licenciatura* and those who realised that they needed to change something in their lives (change profession or career).

In the latter group, for instance, the reasons given are:

- competition in the marketplace is high, so the student recognised the need to conclude the secondary level education followed by a HE course of studies; otherwise, she will not be able to find a job (CI).
- at a certain moment in her life, the student felt that she needed to do more for herself and so decided to enrol in a HE course (LE).

- the idea came after some deep reflection (RP).
- the disappointment that the student is feeling in his actual job and the lack of recognition of his value (PJ).
- feeling some pressure in his job to obtain a HE degree (Ja).
- feeling that the market wanted something more than his first degree. Somehow, he was experiencing a kind of marginalisation because he had not a *Licenciatura* (PC).

Other students also expressed this kind of feeling.

Although the reasons behind the decision to enrol in HE might slightly differ from one student to another, in general these persons present a similar personality. For instance, they all describe themselves as being "ambitious", "used to making sacrifices to attain something in life", "curious", "used to fighting for life". One student argues that "we have to make an effort to learn things. If we don't make this effort, the satisfaction that we will have at the end will not be the same" (PJ). Another says that "[she has] always been an independent woman and a fighter" (FG).

It is also of note that some of these students interrupted their studies because the course they were initially attending was not what they liked and wanted. Generally, the choice of the Courses of Study, they were following was not made by them but by parents. A student refers that she decided to enrol in the course because her "father had [this] course and his dream was that at least one son / daughter had also this course" and so her choice "was not conscious" (Em). Another reported that he wanted to do veterinary work but as he didn't get a place on this course, he was obliged to enrol in another one which he didn't like and abandoned it 2 years later. Another student says that his wish was to obtain a diploma in Computing, but there was no such a course where he lived, so his father forced him to enrol in Management. The result was that 3 years later he left the course unfinished and pursued his dream in another part of the country. Other reasons for abandoning school were: not enough information when she had to decide which course to choose (AP) or family difficulties (CI), problems during the attendance of the course (e.g. one student enrolled in an after working hours course but in that year this course was cancelled and the student was asked to attend the normal day course; this was not possible because he was already working (JA).

#### **5.4.2 Learning and Teaching Approaches**

##### **A) Pedagogical approaches**

Generally speaking, the students do not complain about the learning and teaching approaches used in classes. They say that usually, there are lectures and project work. Mature students, although recognising that project work takes a lot of time (which they don't have), they learn better and deeper with this methodology because it makes them study continuously (instead of studying only for examinations). As one student reported,

*"There are lecturers who have some common sense and know that one month before the start of the examination period, students must already have 80% of the project completed. This allows the student to go into the examination with the work done and so students do not feel so lost. We already had to work from the beginning of the year/term".(AM)*

This student adds that,

*"The methodology of presenting the work since the beginning seems the correct one. In the following presentations we already have developed the capacity and common sense to correct our mistakes. It works very well. But we are talking about HE and so we must have lectures and project work".(AM)*

Another students reports that

*"In the practical work we have to do more research, and so [the learning] is deeper. Students are obliged to deepen the subject. I can tell my experience that is: while I've been doing the practical work of the discipline, I learn it more deeply" (CJ)*

As far as the lectures are concerned, students say that their interest in a discipline depends greatly on the teacher and on his/her capability to motivate the student. Students also say that they like lecturers who know how to teach, how to present the subject, how to involve the student in the subject, being available to clarify doubts that may arise. For instance, one states that "There are teachers that have a gift" (FG) and another says that

*"I like teachers who let students to speak in the classroom and nurture a dialogue between them and students" (RP).*

However, students report some problems:

*"Some teachers do not have an adequate pedagogical attitude. They see mature students as if they were traditional ones. We are older, have family, responsibilities. We make an enormous sacrifice to come here every day and we should feel a warmer reception from the teacher. I think that the first concern of the teacher should be to know his/her students one by one" (PJ)*

Another problem concerns the fact of the teacher ignoring prior knowledge or experience of the student. For instance, one student said that, in a certain subject, he knew more than the teacher but the teacher didn't want to know about that. While there are students confirming the existence of gifted teachers, there are also students stressing the fact that there are teachers that are not gifted at all,

*"that work in another field, do not have time to prepare the lecture; just go to University to earn money and the victims are the students" (FG).*

Students suggest that classes should be more practical and participative. The relationship between the subject and the real world should be established:

*"I think that teacher should present the topics and then show how we would apply that knowledge in real situations" (LE)*

They also suggest that the lecturer summarises the subject in one or two overhead projections and then breaks the class into small groups and make them solve real cases. In this way, students can become more involved with the subject being taught and learn better.

To sum up, students do not dislike lectures but they also need more practical classes where they can put into practice what they have learned, combining this

with their other experiences. Without this practical component, students do not realise if they already know the subject or not.

Another important aspect concerns the pedagogical preparation of the lecturer. Interviewees claim that side by side with good ones, there are those that do not know how to prepare a lecture, even, how to do a presentation. In parallel, there are also those lecturers that are concerned about their students, want to know what their difficulties are and their prior knowledge and experience. Others simply ignore these aspects, which are particularly relevant for mature students.

It is worth noting that, although we have two different case studies belonging to two different types of HE Institutions, in practice the students from both institutions report that the same pedagogical approaches are used – lectures and project work and have similar criticisms. When asked to suggest other pedagogical methods, they were unable to think of different ways of teaching. It seems very hard for a student, used to being taught in a certain way, to think differently. If it is difficult for the student, we believe that it might also be difficult for the teacher. A HE teacher does not have to do pedagogical courses in order to become a teacher, as the focus is on his/her scientific competence. Thus, there is a tendency for HE lecturers to replicate the pedagogical approaches that they experienced when they were students. So far, in Portugal, Higher Education lecturers do not have any specific pedagogical qualification to teach. The focus of the HE lecturers is on scientific competence. The findings of these studies, on issues related with “Teaching and Learning approaches”, points to the need to perform further research to identify and / develop pedagogical approaches suitable for mature students. Furthermore, it is emerging that there is a need for lecturers in HE to be trained in innovative pedagogical approaches, to enable them to address the needs of mature students.

## **B) Assessment**

As for the assessment, students prefer being assessed by the project work rather than the examination. In the examination, something might go wrong and the effort of a semester is lost. Almost all the interviewees prefer to have continuous assessment. They do not want to see their efforts over the whole term assessed by a 2 hours examination. Some students also feel that the presence in classes and the participation should also be taken in consideration for assessment purposes; this opinion is not shared by every student. Some say that if they already know what the lecturer is teaching (and sometimes know more, or have more experience than the lecturer), they do not want to be obliged to attend the class. Furthermore, there are also some students who say that they are shy and do not feel at ease when participating in classes.

### **5.4.3 Difficulties regarding their participation in HE programme**

The difficulties reported by the interviewees are:

- At the start of the course of studies, mature students were afraid of feeling like outsiders, as they were older and were afraid of not being accepted. However, they soon realised that their younger colleagues welcomed them and this problem disappeared.
- Students that work and study at the same time do not have time to spare. They arrive late at home in the evening and the following day everything starts again. They do not have time to study (they study late in the evening

or in the week ends, “stealing” time from their families – wife and children) and have few opportunities to work in groups with their colleagues.

Sometimes students do not understand the subject because they cannot see the way one subject integrates with others. They need to see the “the whole picture”. As a matter of fact, the “the whole picture” is sometimes more than the sum of the parts. Sometimes this difficulty is related to the lack of lecturer preparation to teach.

Administrative services also cause some problems. Very often students have to miss classes in order to solve administrative problems (for example, academic services do not open in the evening or if they do, only for a very short period, not long enough to deal with the administrative matters of every student).

Some lecturers are not sensitive to students’ problems (e.g. time to do home work, to finish projects – and be more flexible with deadlines). Lecturers, also, should take into consideration student’s prior knowledge and experience – it can be very boring to hear a lecturer presenting the basics when some students already know more. ANA: HERE OR IN THE RESULTS ANALYSIS? Student’s arguments can be understood, but knowing “how to do” must be complemented by an understanding of the fundamentals, the theories and the logic. Perhaps the solution is to find a balance between what the student knows and the topics to be taught.

## **6. Future work**

In this paper, we have described the background of the Socrates Grundtvig project *LIHE – Learning in Higher Education* and presented the Portuguese case, within this European cooperation project. Mature students from two course of studies one University and one Polytechnic were selected – ISEGI with *Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação* and ISCAP with *Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado e Licenciatura em Marketing*.

As future work, it is intended to complete 5 more interviews and complete the transcription and the content analysis. Furthermore, we teachers lecturing mature students will also be interviewed in order to cross-check information and elicit profiles and ideas concerning how to teach this kind of student. It is also intended to identify and disseminate innovative approaches and practices of learning / teaching, as well as to produce a handbook of best practices. Finally, the project will develop political recommendations to the EU and to national governments, in order to adapt HE to the needs of adult students.

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